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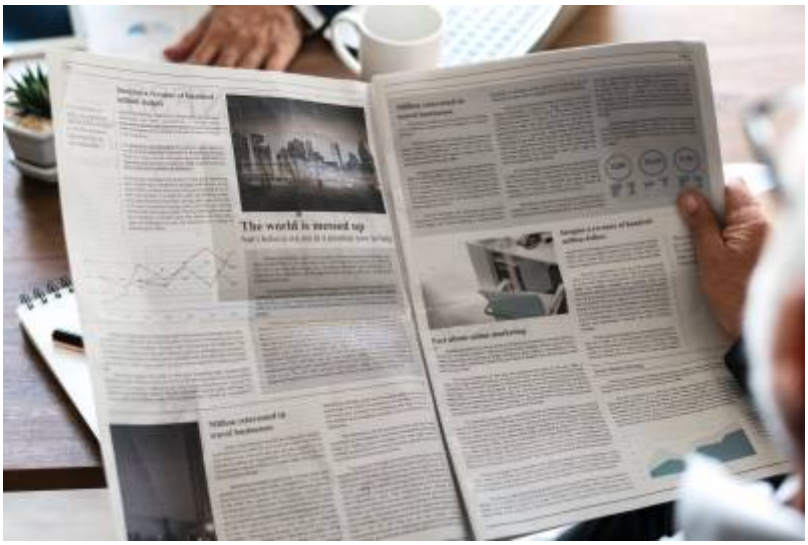
*This page will be updated on **Mondays**. The first article is aimed at a B1 and upwards level and the second article is aimed at a B2 and upwards level*

Articles of the week



US electric grids under pressure from energy-hungry data centers are changing strategy

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By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — With the explosive growth of Big Tech's data centers threatening to overload U.S. electricity grids, policymakers are taking a hard look at a tough-love solution: bumping the

energy-hungry data centers off grids during power emergencies.

Texas moved first, as state lawmakers try to protect residents in the data-center hotspot from another deadly blackout, like the winter storm in 2021 when dozens died.

Now the concept is emerging in the 13-state mid-Atlantic grid and elsewhere as massive data centers are coming online faster than power plants can be built and connected to grids. That has elicited pushback from data centers and Big Tech, for whom a steady power supply is vital.

Like many other states, Texas wants to attract data centers as an economic boon, but it faces the challenge of meeting the huge volumes of electricity the centers demand. Lawmakers there passed a bill in June that, among other things, orders up standards for power emergencies when utilities must disconnect big electric users.

That, in theory, would save enough electricity to avoid a broad blackout on the handful of days during the year when it is hottest or coldest and power consumption pushes grids to their limits or beyond.

Texas was first, but it won't be the last, analysts say, now that the late 2022 debut of OpenAI's ChatGPT ignited worldwide demand for chatbots and other generative AI products that typically require large amounts of computing power to train and operate.

“We're going to see that kind of thing pop up everywhere,” said Michael Webber, a University of Texas engineering professor who specializes in energy. “Data center flexibility will be expected, required, encouraged, mandated, whatever it is.”

Data centers are threatening grids

That's because grids can't keep up with the fast-growing number of data center projects unfolding in Texas and perhaps 20 other states as the U.S. competes in a race against China for artificial intelligence superiority.

Grid operators in Texas, the Great Plains states and the mid-Atlantic region have produced eye-popping projections showing that electricity demand in the coming years will spike, largely due to data centers.

A proposal similar to Texas' has emerged from the nation's biggest grid operator, PJM Interconnection, which runs the mid-Atlantic grid that serves 65 million people and data-center hotspots in Virginia, Ohio and Pennsylvania.

The CEO of the Southwest Power Pool, which operates the grid that serves 18 million people primarily in Kansas, Oklahoma and other Great Plains states, said it has no choice but to expand power-reduction programs — likely for the biggest power users — to meet growing demand.

The proposals are cropping up at a time when electricity bills nationally are rising fast — twice the rate of inflation, according to federal data — and growing evidence suggests that the bills of some regular Americans are rising to subsidize the gargantuan energy needs of Big Tech.

Analysts say power plant construction cannot keep up with the growth of data center demand, and that something must change.

“Data center load has the potential to overwhelm the grid, and I think it is on its way to doing that,” said Joe Bowring, who heads Monitoring Analytics, the independent market watchdog in the mid-Atlantic grid.

Data centers might have to adjust

Big Tech is trying to make their data centers more energy efficient. They are also installing backup generators, typically fueled by diesel, to ensure an uninterrupted power supply if there's a power outage.

Data center operators, however, say they hadn't anticipated needing that backup power supply to help grid operators meet demand and are closely watching how utility regulators in Texas write the regulations.

The Data Center Coalition, which represents Big Tech companies and data center developers, wants the standards to be flexible, since some data centers may not be able to switch to backup power as easily or as quickly as others.

The grid operator also should balance that system with financial rewards for data centers that voluntarily shut down during emergencies, said Dan Diorio of the Data Center Coalition.

Nation's largest grid operator has a proposal

PJM's just-released proposal revolves around a concept in which proposed data centers may not be guaranteed to receive electricity during a power emergency.

That's caused a stir among power plant owners and the tech industry.

Many questioned PJM's legal authority to enforce it or warned of destabilizing energy markets and states scaring off investors and developers with uncertainty and risk.

“This is particularly concerning given that states within PJM's footprint actively compete with other U.S. regions for data center and digital infrastructure investment,” the Digital Power Network, a group of Bitcoin miners and data center developers, said in written comments to PJM.

The governors of Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois and Maryland said they worried that it's too unpredictable to provide a permanent solution and that it should at least be accompanied by incentives for data centers to build new power sources and voluntarily reduce electricity use.

Others, including consumer advocates, warned that it won't lower electric bills and that PJM should instead pursue a “bring your own generation” requirement for data centers to, in essence, build their own power source.

A deal is shrouded in secrecy

In Indiana, Google took a voluntary route.

Last month, the electric utility, Indiana & Michigan Power, and the tech giant filed a power-supply contract with Indiana regulators for a proposed $2 billion data center planned in Fort Wayne in which Google agreed to reduce electricity use there when the grid is stressed. The data center would, it said, reduce electricity use by delaying non-urgent tasks to when the electric grid is under less stress.

However, important details are being kept from the public and Ben Inskeep of the Citizens Action Coalition, a consumer advocacy group, said that leaves it unclear how valuable the arrangement really is, if at all.

A new way of thinking about electricity

To an extent, bumping big users off the grid during high-demand periods presents a new approach to electricity.

It could save money for regular ratepayers, since power is most expensive during peak usage periods.

Abe Silverman, an energy researcher at Johns Hopkins University, said that data centers can and do use all the electricity they want on most days.

But taking data centers off the grid for those handful of hours during the most extreme heat or cold would mean not having to spend billions of dollars to build a bunch of power plants, he said.

“And the question is, is that worth it? Is it worth it for society to build those 10 new power plants just to serve the data centers for five hours a year?” Silverman said. “Or is there a better way to do it?”

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By KEN SWEET AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Armen Kirakosian remembers the frustrations of his first job as a call center agent nearly 10 years ago: the aggravated customers, the constant searching through menus for information and the notes he had to physically write for each call he handled.

Thanks to artificial intelligence, the 29-year-old from Athens, Greece, is no longer writing notes or clicking on countless menus. He often has full customer profiles in front of him when a person calls in and may already know what problem the customer has before even saying “hello.” He can spend more time actually serving the customer.

“A.I. has taken (the) robot out of us,” Kirakosian said.

Roughly 3 million Americans work in call center jobs, and millions more work in call centers around the world, answering billions of inquiries a year about everything from broken iPhones to orders for shoes. Kirakosian works for TTEC, a company that provides third party customer service lines in 22 countries to companies in industries such as autos and banking that need extra capacity or have outsourced their call center operations.

Answering these calls can be thankless work. Roughly half of all customer service agents leave the job after a year, according to McKinsey, with stress and monotonous work being among the reasons employees quit.

Much of what these agents deal with is referred to in the industry as “break/fix,” which means something is broken — or wrong or confusing — and the customer expects the person on the phone to fix the problem. Now, it's a question of who will be tasked with the fix: a human, a computer, or a human augmented by a computer.

Already, AI agents have taken over more routine call center tasks. Some jobs have been lost and there have been dire forecasts about the future job market for these individuals, ranging from modest single-percentage point losses, to as many as half of all call center jobs going away in the next decade. The drop likely won't match the more dire predictions, however, because it's become evident that the industry will still need humans, perhaps with even higher levels of learning and training, as some customer service issues become increasingly harder to solve.

Some finance companies have already experimented with going in heavily with AI for their customer service issues.

Klarna, the Swedish buy now, pay later company, replaced 700 of their roughly 3,000 customer service agents with chatbots and AI in 2024. The results were mixed. While the company did save money, Klarna found there was still a need for higher skilled human agents in certain circumstances, such as complicated issues related to identity theft. Earlier this year, Klarna hired seven internal freelancers to handle these issues.

Earlier this year, Klarna hired a handful of customer service employees back to the firm, acknowledging there were certain issues that AI couldn't handle as well as a real person, like identity theft.

“Our vision of an AI-first contact center, where AI agents handle the majority of conversations and fewer, better trained and better paid human agents support only the most complex tasks, is quickly becoming a reality,” said Gadi Shamia of Replicant, an AI-software company that trains chatbots to sound more human, in an interview with consultants at McKinsey.

The call center customer's experience, while improved, is still far from perfect.

The initial customer service call has long been handled through interactive voice response systems, known in the industry as IVR. Customers interact with IVR when they're told “press one for sales, press two for support, press five for billing.” These crude systems got an update in the 2010s, when customers could prompt the system by saying “sales” or “support” or simple phrases like “I'd like to pay a bill” instead of navigating through a labyrinthian set of menu options.

But customers have little patience for these menus, leading them to “zero out,” which is call center slang for when a customer hits the zero button on their their keypad in hopes of reaching a human. It's also not uncommon that after a customer “zeros out” they will be put on hold and transferred because they did not end up in the right place for their request.

Aware of Americans' collective impatience with IVR, Democratic Sen. Ruben Gallego of Arizona and Republican Jim Justice of West Virginia have introduced the “Keep Call Centers in America Act,” which would require clear ways to reach a human agent, and provide incentives to companies that keep call center jobs in the U.S.

Companies are trying to roll out telephone systems that broadly understand customer service

requests and predict where to send a customer without navigating a menu. OpenAI, the maker of ChatGPT, is coming out with its “ChatGPT Agent” service for users that's able to understand phrases like “I need to find a hotel for a wedding next year, please give me options for clothing and gifts.”

Bank of America says it has had increasing success in integrating such features into “Erica,” its chatbot that debuted in 2018. When Erica cannot handle a request, the agent transfers the customer directly to the right department. Erica is now also predictive and analytical, and knows for instance that a customer may repeatedly have a low balance and may need better help budgeting or may have multiple subscriptions to the same service.

Bank of America said this month that Erica has been used 3 billion times since its creation and is increasingly taking on a higher case load of customer service requests. The chatbot's moniker comes from the last five letters of the company's name.

James Bednar, vice president of product and innovation at TTEC, has spent much of his career trying to make customer service calls less painful for the caller as well as the company. He said these tools could eventually kill off IVR for good, ending the need for anyone to “zero out.”

“We're getting to the point where AI will get you to the right person for your problem without you having to route through those menus,” Bednar said.

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